

1. INTRODUCTION

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Homelessness among families has become a growing phenomenon. Beginning in the early 1980s, families with young children became one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population and now comprise 34 percent of the homeless population (i.e., 23% children and 11% adults) (Burt et al., 1999). In a given year, this means that 420,000 families, including 924,000 children, experience homelessness in the United States. These numbers reveal that, over the course of a year, approximately 1.8 percent of all families are homeless at least one day, including eight percent of all poor families.

Further evidence that homelessness is a common experience for poor families comes from a national telephone survey that found 7.4 percent of U.S. adults in households with telephones had been literally homeless (i.e., sleeping in shelters, abandoned buildings, bus and train stations) at least once in their lifetime. Of those who had ever received public assistance (typically as part of families), 19.8 percent had been literally homeless at least once in their lifetime. Adding the category of doubling-up (i.e., families living with relatives or friends) to the definition of homelessness results in nearly one-third of the people (31.2%) who had ever received public assistance reporting being homeless at least once in their lifetime (Link et al., 1994).

Any available numbers are likely to underestimate the extent to which families either experience homelessness (Shinn and Bassuk, 2004) or are at imminent risk of homelessness. In particular, the size of the literally homeless family population is largely influenced by shelter policies and practices. Homeless families, unlike single individuals, rarely live on the streets. Because the majority stay in shelters, the size of the family homeless population in a given location depends in part on the number of shelter beds available. Recent reports of shelter directors turning away 32 percent of family requests for shelter (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005) suggest that the potential size of the homeless population is considerably greater than current estimates. The families included in these estimates are limited to those families who stay together as a unit. Much less is known about those families that are no longer intact in which the mother or father is now considered a single adult. In the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC), for example, almost two-thirds of homeless clients have

one or more children, with only 31 percent having minor children currently living with them (Burt et al., 1999).

A small body of research has provided insight into the risk factors associated with family homelessness, the housing and service needs that homeless families have, and the role that affordable housing can play in ending homelessness for many families. The studies, though varied in method, participant selection, and geographic context, provide a preliminary basis for understanding the range of experiences and needs of families. These studies have revealed considerable variability among families with respect to their residential histories and the factors that place them at risk of homelessness, as well as those factors that keep them homeless. Although there have been a variety of studies undertaken, three main studies have focused on homeless families: a 5-year followup of representative samples of first-time homeless families and families receiving public assistance in New York City (Shinn et al., 1998); a longitudinal evaluation of a nine-city program for homeless families who received subsidies for both housing and case management (Rog, Holupka, and McCombs-Thornton, 1995a); and the Worcester Family Research Project (WFRP), a case-control study of homeless families and families on welfare (Bassuk et al., 1996). In addition, the NSHAPC, directed by Burt and colleagues (1999), has contributed to the understanding of basic characteristics of homeless families across the nation, and analyses of administrative data sets in New York City and Philadelphia by Dennis Culhane and S. Metraux (1999) have improved the understanding of families' use of shelter and the interconnection of homelessness with involvement in other services and systems.

Because of the range of experiences and needs among homeless families, it is difficult to know the extent to which certain types of interventions are warranted and the ways in which they can be best delivered to meet the needs of these families and their children. The construction of a typology that identifies distinct subgroups of families with specific constellations of risk factors and needs would be helpful in guiding both practice and policy. Such a typology could enhance and improve the ability to more effectively target existing services, maximize the potential of existing programs to meet the needs of specific subgroups, and identify new opportunities to prevent homelessness for specific groups and more effectively intervene with others.

Westat, in collaboration with Vanderbilt University's Center for Evaluation and Program Improvement, was contracted by the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to conceptualize a typology of homeless families. Through this project, and in consultation with other Federal agencies, DHHS seeks to identify

opportunities and strategies to improve data about homeless families upon which future policy and program decisions may be based. The extensiveness and the quality of data on homeless families with children are substantially less robust than the available information about single homeless individuals. This project will investigate the availability of data with which to construct a typology of homeless families. Such a typology would foster a better understanding of these families' characteristics, service needs, interactions with human services systems, and the dynamics of their use of emergency shelter and other services and assistance. The purpose of this report is to identify key knowledge gaps regarding homeless families and to consider whether these gaps may most efficiently be filled through secondary analysis of existing data, adding questions or a module to planned surveys that include low-income populations, or whether additional primary data would be needed. Ultimately, it is intended that an improved understanding of the characteristics of homeless families with children will guide the development of appropriate service responses to such families and provide an empirical foundation for the design of homelessness prevention and intervention approaches.

This 24-month project, begun in September 2004, provided a vehicle for the identification of opportunities and strategies to improve data and data collection efforts regarding homeless families. The project consisted of three phases: assessing the availability of already existing data that could be mined through secondary data analysis; proposing a set of questions to modify existing and ongoing surveys that would allow for the key research questions related to homeless families to be answered, and conceptualizing various primary data collections that would specifically collect the kind of data required to develop a typology of homeless families. The research recommendations described in this report lay the foundation for future data collection efforts affecting policy and programmatic decisions for this particular population.

First, project staff explored existing data and data collection vehicles for their suitability for reanalysis or secondary data analysis related to homeless families. As an initial step toward developing data recommendations, project staff conducted a literature review examining the available data on family homelessness, including the characteristics of homeless families, key knowledge gaps, and background information for a typology conceptualization. Contractor staff then examined existing data and data collection vehicles to identify major national or multijurisdictional surveys that might include large numbers of low-income respondents (e.g., potentially homeless or homeless families).

An Expert Panel meeting was convened in July 2005 to consider topics that would need to be included as possible elements of a typology. For the purposes of discussion, four papers were developed for the Expert Panel meeting:

- Impact of Homelessness on Children: An Analytic Review of the Literature
- Toward a Typology of Homeless Families: Conceptual and Methodological Issues
- Permanent Housing for Homeless Families: A Review of Opportunities and Impediments
- The Characteristics and Causes of Homelessness among At Risk Families with Children in Twenty American Cities.

Second, expecting that even if some secondary data analysis was possible utilizing existing datasets that the absence of key questions would limit the analysis that could be done, the project staff developed a short battery of housing questions for possible use in future surveys of low-income populations, along with identifying options for primary data collection and analysis regarding the target population. The third and final phase of the project was the development of a set of approaches for a primary data collection that could fill key data gaps with respect to homeless families.

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 presents the literature review. Chapter 3 summarizes the Expert Panel meeting and presents feedback on four commissioned papers. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the datasets reviewed for the project, and discusses knowledge gaps about homeless families and their needs. Chapter 5 discusses the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, the one dataset that held promise for secondary data analysis, in the light of a number of current research questions. Chapter 6 discusses a number of Federal surveys and explores whether these can be modified or enhanced to include questions on homelessness. Chapter 7 explores potential primary data collection opportunities by which to collect additional information that could in the development of a typology of homeless families. Chapter 8 summarizes what has been learned during this effort and suggests the next steps to take in developing a typology of homeless families.

The report concludes with a number of appendixes and a bibliography. Appendix A is a paper by John Buckner, “Impact of Homelessness on Children: An Analytic Review of the Literature.” Appendix B is a paper by Rene Jahiel and Thomas Babor, “Toward a Typology of Homeless Families: Conceptual and Methodological Issues.” Appendix C is a paper by Jill Khadduri and Bulbul Kaul, “Permanent Housing for Homeless Families: A Review of Opportunities and Impediments.” Appendix D

is a paper by David Reingold and Angela Fertig, “The Characteristics and Causes of Homelessness Among At-Risk Families with Children in Twenty American Cities.” Appendix E presents the Fragile Families data set. Appendix F is the bibliography.

